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Viewing cable 09BUENOSAIRES429, ARGENTINA: TOP CANDIDATES IN KEY LEGISLATIVE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09BUENOSAIRES429	2009-04-09 22:06	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Buenos Aires

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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: TOP CANDIDATES IN KEY LEGISLATIVE
BATTLEGROUND OF BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 347
[1](#)B. BUENOS AIRES 360 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)C. BUENOS AIRES 144

Classified By: Ambassador Wayne for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former president Nestor Kirchner has once again upset the political apple cart, this time by floating the idea that he and the current governor of Buenos Aires province, Daniel Scioli, will head the Victory Front (FpV) slate of candidates for national deputies from the province of Buenos Aires in the June 28 mid-term congressional elections. Scioli's "candidacy" would merely be intended to gain votes for the FpV slate -- he is not expected to give up his governorship midway through his term in order to join the Chamber of Deputies. He would take leave from his parliamentary position in order to continue governing the province, leaving his seat to be filled by an alternate.

¶2. (C) Buenos Aires province, representing 37.1 percent of the national vote, is "the mother of all battles" in Argentina's legislative race to be held June 28 (ref A). As candidacies have not yet been formally registered -- the deadline is May 9 -- speculation is intense about who will run on the principal party slates. Peronist dissident Francisco de Narvaez will lead the center-right triple alliance that includes fellow dissident Felipe Sola and the backing of Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri of Republican Proposal (PRO). Civic Coalition (CC) leader Elisa Carrio announced she will not run for Congress and plans to campaign in Buenos Aires province for candidate Margarita Stolbizer, who will head the CC's anticipated joint slate with the Radical Party (UCR). The Kirchners' surprise of moving up the legislative elections by four months has almost certainly put pressure on a divided opposition (ref B) but is also widely attributed to the Kirchners' recognition of declining public support in the face of a sagging economy and rising crime. Opposition sectors are looking to convince the key electoral demographic of Buenos Aires province that they are a better option for dealing with the crime surge and an economic downturn, even while the Casa Rosada remains in FpV hands. End Summary.

Buenos Aires Province: The Plum Race

¶3. (SBU) The electoral plum in the June 28 congressional elections is Buenos Aires province. The province, which represents 37.1 percent of the national vote, will elect 35 national deputies, 20 of whom are currently members of the Kirchner-allied Victory Front (FpV) and one who is a Kirchner ally. Throughout the nation, a total of 127 deputies will be elected. Congressional deputies are voted by party lists to represent their provinces at-large. Buenos Aires province, particularly the poor and working class suburbs surrounding the federal capital, has been a Peronist stronghold for the last 20 years and is key to the Kirchners' electoral success nationwide. As congressional elections have been moved up by four months (ref B), parties are scurrying to determine slate compositions and order of candidates. Although candidacies have yet to be formally registered -- the deadline is May 9 -- speculation is intense about who will head the principal party slates.

Will Nestor and/or Scioli Head the FpV Slate?

¶4. (SBU) While it has long been expected that former President Nestor Kirchner (NK), president of the Peronist Party (PJ) and husband of current president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK), will head the FPV slate in Buenos Aires province, speculation has increased recently on whether he would press Buenos Aires Governor Daniel Scioli into joining him at the top of the slate. Scioli served as NK's vice-president 2003-07 and in 2007 won more votes in Buenos Aires province for governor than CFK did for president. Polls show that the affable Scioli remains more popular than either of the Kirchners, and he is considered a contender for the 2011 presidential race.

¶5. (SBU) Despite NK's penchant for keeping people guessing, he has been working the campaign trail like a candidate, with a series of appearances in locations throughout the province.

Newspapers report that NK is seeking to change (or has already changed) his residency from the province of Santa Cruz (where he was governor before becoming president) to Buenos Aires province to meet residency requirements for running in Buenos Aires. (Note: While such a change in residency would not appear to meet the Constitution's five-year residency requirement, electoral authorities have

showed themselves to be very flexible in interpreting the rules and allowing candidacies.)

¶6. (C) NK, who is intent on a strong FPV electoral victory, may yet decide not to run and let Scioli lead the ticket -- particularly if his private polls suggest an NK-led ticket would lose, even by a small margin. Should Scioli win a seat in Congress, he could take a leave of absence to return to his gubernatorial duties. Some opposition leaders have criticized this scenario, saying it is cynical and harmful to the integrity of the electoral process to run for office without any intention of serving. Media reported April 9, however, that NK intends to ask all Kirchner-allied mayors throughout the province to replicate the Scioli move by heading their slates of candidates for city council.

NK is Ahead in the Polls, but Declining

¶7. (SBU) Recent polls vary widely, with two lesser-known polls in March showing NK with a 20-point lead over his opponents while leading daily "La Nacion" reported him tied with Peronist dissident Francisco De Narvaez. "Clarín" on March 22 showed NK receiving 19.9% to De Narvaez's 18.5% and the Civic Coalition (CC) candidate Margarita Stolbizer's 11.3%. Many observers, however, point out that NK's trend lines are declining while De Narvaez and Stolbizer are rising.

De Narvaez Heads the Triple Alliance Slate

¶8. (C) Francisco de Narvaez is a wealthy entrepreneur and member of Congress whose business empire includes significant media outlets. In 2007, he made an impressive showing in the gubernatorial race in Buenos Aires province, winning 15% of the votes after Scioli and Stolbizer. (De Narvaez ran as an independent without a presidential candidate at the top of his ticket.) Former Kirchner-allied Governor Felipe Sola, now a member of the Chamber of Deputies with presidential aspirations, surprised many observers by agreeing to take the number two spot on the ticket with De Narvaez. Together they had previously announced with Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri of Republican Proposal (PRO) a center-right alliance commonly referred to as the "dissident Peronists," aimed squarely at defeating the governing Kirchnerist coalition. All three have higher political ambitions (ref C); Sola and Macri hope to be President while the Colombian-born De Narvaez aims for the Buenos Aires governorship (De Narvaez's foreign birth makes him ineligible to be President, per the Constitution). In recent weeks, the press has played up tension among them, but Macri recently told the Ambassador he is confident that the dissident Peronists will defeat the Kirchner slate in the province or come close enough so that the results leave the Kirchners without a majority in Congress.

Civic Coalition's Carrio Backs Out

¶9. (SBU) Although not running as a candidate herself in Buenos Aires province, CC party leader Elisa Carrio (who finished second in the 2007 presidential election) is campaigning for CC leader in Buenos Aires province Margarita Stolbizer, who is negotiating to head a combined slate of CC, UCR and Socialist candidates for the Chamber of Deputies. In the 2007 gubernatorial race, Stolbizer received 17% of the votes, placing second behind Scioli.

Alfonsín's Son a Possible UCR Candidate

¶10. (SBU) Despite press reports over the April 4-5 weekend of shaky relations between the CC and the UCR following former UCR President Raul Alfonsin's death on March 31, the parties appear to be resolving their differences. Shortly after Alfonsin's death, some UCR sectors were calling for Alfonsin's son, Ricardo, to head a single UCR ballot in the province. Nonetheless, the CC and UCR now appear to be considering Ricardo for the slate's number two position should they agree to present a united slate, according to recent press reports. Both UCR and CC leaders appear supportive of Ricardo's candidacy, hoping that his father's popularity will improve their electoral chances in June.

What Matters to Voters

¶11. (C) Opposition candidates are focusing their campaigning on crime, security, and unemployment, likely to be voters'

top concerns. Alberto Fernandez, former Cabinet Chief of CFK, told the Ambassador in late March that polls taken in Buenos Aires province show the number one concern to be crime and security, and this will be the top issue on peoples' minds. He said Kirchner would try to add "'governability'" to the mix, arguing that if his slate loses no one else can lead Argentines through the economic crisis. Most analysts agree that crime and economic concerns, particularly unemployment, are on the top of the list as the impact of a deepening economic downturn spreads to formal and informal sector employment.

Comment

¶12. (C) As post has noted (reftels), the June 28 mid-term elections may determine whether CFK will enjoy majority support in Congress for the remainder of her presidential term through 2011, and they are also being viewed as a harbinger of the 2011 presidential race. Many observers believe the Kirchners have upped the stakes. Because of the divided field and the complicated formula for apportioning seats, the Kirchners might have convincingly claimed victory on June 29 by winning only 35% of the vote -- enough, by some accounts, to retain a working majority in Congress. But by proposing to put incumbent governors and mayors on the ballots in legislative races, the Kirchners and their allies may be turning the election into a plebiscite on their performance in office -- in which case, anything less than 51% of the vote could be viewed as a popular rejection of the Kirchners.

¶13. (C) Argentine politics is known for its personality-driven nature, but this electoral season has accentuated that attribute even more. Daily press reports highlight differences and tension among key opposition candidates while portraying NK as the clever strategist fueling political jockeying within Peronist circles and without. Moving up the legislative elections has almost certainly put pressure on an already divided opposition to present a unified front. In addition, opposition sectors must convince a key electoral demographic in the province that they can effectively legislate during an economic downturn amidst fears of rising crime, and while the Casa Rosada remains in FpV hands.

WAYNE